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ABSTRACT

Three rehabilitation counselors and three consumers participated in two focus groups on the impact of the 1992 Rehabilitation Act Amendments on vocational rehabilitation services. Analysis of the discussions found a combination of three elements emerged as necessary for consumers and counselors to feel satisfied with the VR process. These were: (1) a positive working relationship between the consumer and his/her counselor; (2) active involvement of the consumer; and (3) ready availability of services. Implications for successful service delivery include building a positive relationship with consumers, enhancing consumer participation through such mechanisms as authentic assessment procedures and Person Centered Planning, and expanding services through strong linkages between vocational rehabilitation agencies and other employment services, training for utilization of natural supports, and consumer control of service dollars. (DB)

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Perspectives From Consumers And Counselors On Elements Contributing To Successful Vocational Rehabilitation Service Delivery

by Dawn M. Thomas and Jean Whitney Thomas December 1996

Introduction

The 1992 Amendments to The Rehabilitation Act resulted in changes and proposed improvements to one of the most significant piece of U.S. social policy legislation committed to full inclusion for individuals with disabilities (Schriner, 1996). The Amendments sought to improve services by increasing access, enhancing involvement of the consumer, and broadening the range of services to insure positive employment outcomes. In the Fall of 1994 the Institute for Community Inclusion convened a series of focus groups with vocational rehabilitation counselors and consumers to better understand the impact of the 1992 Rehabilitation Act Amendments on services. The findings summarized here describe what these individuals perceive as critical to a successful vocational rehabilitation experience.

Participants

A total of three rehabilitation counselors and three consumers participated in two focus groups. Among the participants were four women and two men, a number of whom had physical, medical, mild cognitive or visual impairments. Participants worked in or attended offices that represented both urban and suburban communities. Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) professionals had an average of 9 years (ranging from 6-10) of service in the VR system. Two VR professionals reported having their Certified Rehabilitation Counselor certification. Consumers were involved with the state rehabilitation system for an average of 7 years (ranging from 2-10).

Defining Elements that Influence Successful Service Delivery

Based on the discussions, a combination of three elements emerged as necessary for consumers and counselors to feel satisfied with the VR process. The elements include: (a) a positive working relationship between the consumer and his or her counselor, (b) active involvement of the consumer, and (c) ready availability of services.

Positive Working Relationship

Both counselors and consumers characterized a positive working relationship as one in which free exchange of knowledge about services, needs and expectations takes place. Counselors emphasized the importance of cooperation and open communication between consumers and counselors. Consumers spoke of how counselors facilitated the rehabilitation process by coordinating a variety of tasks such as: evaluations, working with high schools, referrals to agencies and service providers outside the VR system, arranging accommodations for colleges and assisting consumers with employment searches. A truly positive working relationship, however, is one that goes beyond the mere coordination of tasks into emotional support and shared responsibilities. One consumer who felt very positively about her counselor said:

> *My counselor was always there for venting. I mean, I could just call him on the phone, and he'd call me back, and I'd say, I'm frustrated because I can't do this or I can't do that...he allowed me to do a lot on my own. We sit together and we did our goals and we changed them as we needed to.*

Despite reports of positive relationships, the discussions also revealed bureaucratic and communication barriers can undermine a good relationship. Counselors cited the Amendments' new 60-day eligibility process as problematic in building a bond with their consumers. While counselors agree that the system needs to be more efficient and accessible, they indicated that the 60-day timeline was not always long enough, "... to do the kind of counseling and guidance...where you really get to know the individual, and work with him or her planning... setting everything up so that it would fit together and it really was a package."

According to consumers, communication breakdowns were often the greatest barrier to a positive working relationship with VR counselors. One consumer described the problem as "... a big lack of communication" and "often I find myself informing them [counselors] about available resources." The consumers in the discussions often were unsure of what the counselor could do for them.

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Involvement of the Consumer

The second critical element to insure a successful vocational rehabilitation experience was active consumer involvement. VR professionals said that the more involved and assertive the consumer, better the services. As one counselor put it, "If you have a disability and a feisty personality you can get whatever you want from this agency." Another stated, "There is no limit to consumer involvement." Consumers' involvement as described by the participants in this study included: obtaining documentation and developing the Individualized Written Rehabilitation Plan (IWRP). Consumers also told us that they participated by connecting to services, applying for educational grants, informing counselors of resources, and being assertive.

Despite the suggestion that assertive consumers receive better services, the assertive consumer is often seen as pushy; a perception that can potentially cause friction in the consumer/counselor relationship. Counselors expressed concern regarding the difference between empowerment and entitlement. One counselor commented:

> *...there is more of a feeling of empowerment in terms of what they perceive they should be receiving. I worry though...that there's a difference between empowerment and entitlement, and that message isn't getting across...the misconception that VR is something that just because you have a disability, you're entitled to.*

Consumers did not describe in detail how they felt empowered beyond gathering information and participating in the IWRP. Their lack of direct and active input into their rehabilitation process suggests that consumer involvement is still occurring in fairly traditional ways.

Availability of Services

The availability of services is the final critical element to a successful rehabilitation process. As one consumer put it, "I think, when you're talking to consumers, services will be the key, because that's what they are looking for." According to VR counselors, however, limited resources have had a negative impact on their ability to broker services, especially for those individuals with severe disabilities. One counselor expressed his concern as, "resources are shrinking everywhere, its harder to access [services like interpreters and specialized testing] and pull them in to help." Another counselor suggested that VR agencies are hesitant to serve individuals with multiple or complex disabilities for financial reasons.

> *if it's a disability that doesn't require a lot of funding, to get that person to a point they'll go after that disability. If that disability requires funding, they don't want to hear it.*

In general, the Amendments may have expanded access to the system, but funding limitations continue to have a major influence on who gets services and how those services are delivered.

Implications

Fundamental to the implementation of the Rehabilitation Act and successful service delivery is a productive and mutually beneficial counselor/consumer relationship. The following recommendations are suggestions for building a positive and collaborative relationship between consumers and counselors:

- **Building a positive relationship.** Positive relationships begin with communication, trust and respect. Open and ongoing communication with consumers should involve informing them of the pitfalls as, well, as the benefits of the system to establish trust and respect.
- **Consumers should participate fully in the process.** It is critical for consumers to be treated as full partners contributing equally in the rehabilitation process. Authentic assessment procedures and Person Centered Planning are two mechanisms to enhance consumer involvement in the development of IWRP. In addition, more and more states are implementing choice programs and experimenting with service vouchers to increase consumer ownership of the service delivery.
- **Expanding Services.** Building strong linkages between vocational rehabilitation agencies and other employment services is one way to broaden opportunities. Another recommendation is to train consumers and professionals to understand and utilize natural supports when possible. Finally, consumer control of service dollars (via vouchers and choice programs) can allow consumers to be creative in the design and access to services so they can better fit their needs and lives.

Reference

Schriner, Kay, (1996) The Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1992: Initiatives and Issues, Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling, 27 (1), 37-42

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